

The call goes out for blood donors

NATALIE STOREY, Bismarck Tribune

Seventeen years ago Cal Thorson found himself in a life-threatening accident after a semi-truck broadsided his car on the Interstate. His life was saved after 8 pints of blood were infused into his body.

Before that time Thorson had given blood occasionally, but he hadn't really understood the significance of the act. But since the car accident he's realized how vital those 8 pints of blood, and the donors who gave them, were to his survival.

Thorson has become a regular blood donor, having donated about 5 gallons of blood throughout his life. This week he's taking that a step further. He's coordinating his first blood drive at the Northern Great Plains Research Center near Mandan today with the help of United Blood Services.

Thorson wants people in Bismarck and Mandan to understand the importance of giving blood.

"If there's no blood when it's needed, people die," he said.

Thorson's idea to coordinate a blood drive comes at a good time, said Paul Frank, donor recruitment representative at United Blood Services. Even though United Blood Services has frequent blood drives, Frank said Bismarck's supply of blood is running low. This situation, he said, could quickly become dangerous to patients needing blood transfusions.

A combination of factors have depleted some of United Blood Services' donor base. Many regular donors have been unable to donate because they have been sent overseas to Iraq or Afghanistan, and some have been in areas with a variety of diseases, all factors that prevent donors from giving blood. The result has been a shortage of about 10 units of blood for the past couple of months at United Blood Services.

"We're doing lots of begging -- for lack of a better word -- for people to come and donate blood," Frank said.

Connie Morris, associate executive director at United Blood Services, said the clinic needs to draw about 26 units of blood a day to meet regular demand as well as handling emergency situations.

"In reality what it could take is one serious car accident for our supply to be depleted," Morris said.

That very situation occurred two weeks ago in Bismarck. There was an emergency surgery that had to be performed, which depleted much of United Blood Services' supply. Because of the one major surgery, many other minor surgeries had to be canceled that day.

The situation isn't dire yet, but the possibility of another emergency is worrisome, Frank said.

"People in North Dakota donate on a higher percentage than people in other states, so to see a shortage like this really isn't good," Frank said.

Or perhaps potential donors aren't coming in because they are afraid of needles. But Thorson and fellow donor Bruce Boehm said there is no reason to be scared. Thorson had a fear of needles since he was a small boy. His father had diabetes and Thorson would watch him inject himself with insulin. But it only took a few donations for Thorson to completely overcome his fear, he said.

Boehm agrees. "It's painless and it takes very little time," he said.

Boehm has donated almost 24 gallons of plasma in his lifetime and plans on giving more. Donating, he says, makes him feel good. Besides, what comes around goes around, he said.

"There might be a time when I'm laying on that bed and I hope when I look over there's a pint of blood ready to be hooked up to my arm," he said.

United Blood Services will have its "Blood Mobile" in action from 2 to 6 p.m. today at Northern Great Plains Research Center. They will draw blood from employees and community members. Anyone interested is encouraged to stop by.

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